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# Lost & Found

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# LOST & FOUND

by

DIANE SPEIGHT

Under the Direction of Elizabeth Throop

## ABSTRACT

Digital technology has expanded the designer's creative reach, but cannot duplicate the complexity of the imperfect and unexpected results of handmade processes. By executing a series of hand-built collage and assemblage pieces, I hope to not only rediscover the pleasure of working with my hands but also to develop creative methods to incorporate into future design projects. In this body of work, I have manually executed tasks that designers perform with software — cutting, pasting, layering, aligning, and creating transparency and drop shadows. The pieces are built from new and found materials, using text and images from old family letters and photos — physical evidence of relationships from my childhood and those of my parents and grandparents. These pieces express fragments of memories and family history.

INDEX WORDS: Handmade processes in graphic design, Hand-cut type, Collage, Assemblage, Found objects, Nostalgia

LOST & FOUND

by

DIANE SPEIGHT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Art

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2014

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2014



LOST & FOUND

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May 2014

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this to my dear family, Ron, Zelda and Jessie. Thank you for your encouragement, patience, endless brainstorming, technical advice and inspiration.

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Thank you to all of my friends — new and old, who have encouraged me through this project. A special thank you to my work family at Morton Vardeman & Carlson who have allowed me immeasurable flexibility to complete this task, especially Tina Carlson and Lisa Aldridge for their grace, patience, support and great ideas. Thank you to Dr. Helen Perry for inspiration, encouragement and words of wisdom. Thank you also to Susan Currier and to Jim Chapman, without whose friendly nudge, I might never have tried in the first place. And lastly, I am endlessly grateful to my committee, Elizabeth Throop, Stan Anderson, Paige Taylor and John Decker for your tireless generosity of spirit, creative guidance and for encouraging me to take chances. You have truly helped to change the way I approach my work.

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## INTRODUCTION

A few years ago it occurred to me that I rarely work with physical materials to create design imagery. Although I know a few designers who create their own illustrations and hand-lettering, I had never developed my own work in a way that might be used in a design project, preferring to rely completely on digital methods. Perhaps it was a lack of time, or maybe it was what I thought my clients would expect. Whatever the reason, I longed to feel more connected to my work and I wondered if a non-digital approach might develop such a connection. But what might handmade design look like? Certainly, it's a broad concept that could go in many directions, from digitally-delivered design containing scanned or photographed hand-created elements to one-of-a-kind objects.

Handmade solutions may not be appropriate for some projects. We are, after all, speaking on our clients' behalf, and their "voice" may not be correctly expressed with the possibly irregular and offbeat results working by hand might produce. But, I realized that if I never took the time to develop my own work, I would not be prepared when the correct project did come along. I am not alone in this pursuit. My research produced many exciting examples of designers exploring analog design solutions.

"Handmade processes and aesthetics have been returning to design for a decade or so. Mass-produced, machine-made and digitally crafted works have ceded some ground to the imperfect, tactile and subjective qualities of the handmade, and we have found ways to intervene by hand in the more alienating aspects of technology."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, Angharad. "Driven by a Love of Craft and Physical Materials, the Hands-on Approach Is Enjoying an Inspiring Resurgence in the Design World. Creative Bloq." *The Future of Handmade Design*. p. 21 May 2013. Web. 16 Apr. 2014. <http://www.creativebloq.com/future-handmade-design-5132895>.

I would be lost without my computer, but giving it a different role in this project changed the way I think about my work.

## GETTING STARTED

When beginning the much-anticipated process of rediscovering my own work, I confess, I was a bit lost. I knew I wanted to execute a body of work using handmade processes, but had no idea where that would lead. I sketched, researched and brainstormed endlessly until the possibilities became overwhelming. I was treading outside the familiar territory of software and into the forgotten waters of art-making, attempting to do something that might take years to develop. I had no concrete idea, and no clear-cut process in mind. Finding my predicament somewhat ridiculous, I Googled “fear of art” hoping to find some psychological insight to unravel my mental straightjacket. Much to my surprise, David Bayles’ & Ted Orland’s book *Art and Fear* appeared. This book was the “reset button” I needed. The authors pull back the curtain on the messy, inexact, self-doubting process of art-making and explain that when we look at other people’s finished work, we assume that the end result was exactly what they had in mind from the beginning. Bayles and Orland break down some of the mystique of art-making and the creative process by examining the disparity between idea and result.<sup>2</sup>

“As Stanley Kunitz once commented, ‘The poem in the head is always perfect. Resistance begins when you try to convert it into language.’ And it’s true, most artists don’t daydream about making great art—they daydream about *having made* great art. What artist has not experienced the feverish euphoria of composing the *perfect* thumbnail sketch, first draft, negative or melody — only to run headlong into a

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<sup>2</sup> Bayles, David, and Ted Orland. *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. Santa Barbara, CA: Capra, 1993. Print.

stone wall trying to convert that tantalizing hint into the finished mural, novel, photograph, sonata. The artist's life is frustrating not because the passage is slow, but because he imagines it to be fast.”<sup>3</sup>

This book gave me the courage to pursue authenticity over perfection, and to realize that an honest failure would not be the worst possible outcome. The reassurance that even the most experienced artists struggle with uncertainty helped me focus on learning from the process.

“In the ideal — that is to say, *real* — artist, fears not only continue to exist, they exist side by side with the desires that complement them, perhaps drive them, certainly feed them. Naïve passion, which promotes work done in ignorance of obstacles, becomes — with courage — informed passion, which promotes work done in full acceptance of those obstacles. Foremost among those obstacles is uncertainty.”<sup>4</sup>

Befriending uncertainty, I began by arranging a collection of found objects on a flat surface and photographing the arrangements. This seemed pointless at first, but the process of creating relationships through the placement of objects was helpful. I was soon lost in thinking about shape, proximity, positive and negative space. Knowing that I would not save the arrangements nor commit to them in any way, was liberating. It was play.<sup>5</sup> How would I have ever known that the seemingly pointless exercise would lead me down an entire road and return full circle to end my project with a large-scale arrangement on the gallery wall?

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<sup>3</sup> Bayles, 17

<sup>4</sup> Bayles, 50

<sup>5</sup> Lewandowski, Daniel. "Paul-Rand.com." *Paul Rand on the Play Instinct*. 2007. Web. 24 Apr. 2014. <[http://www.paul-rand.com/foundation/thoughts\\_playInstinct/#.U1kBqceFE1g](http://www.paul-rand.com/foundation/thoughts_playInstinct/#.U1kBqceFE1g)>.



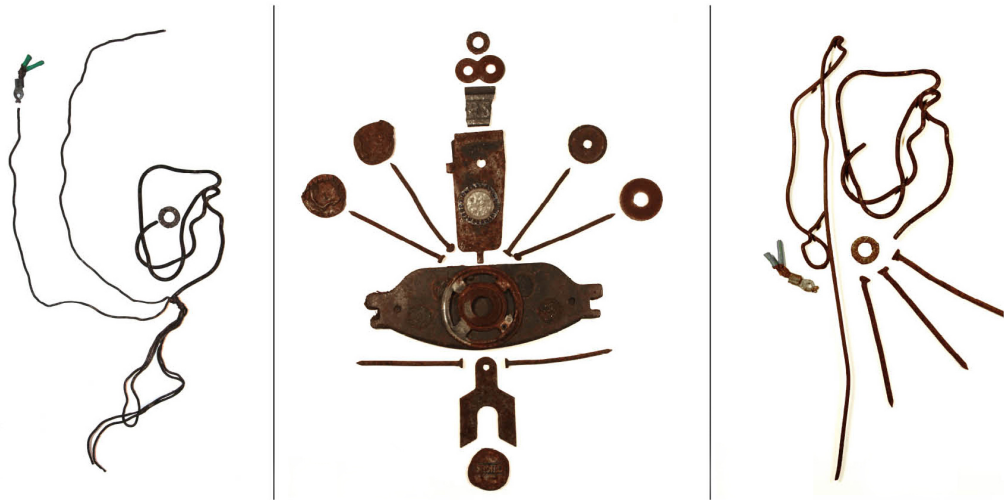


Figure 1 Found object arrangements, 2013

### HANDMADE GRAPHIC DESIGN?

Can design be handmade? Through my research, I found that, indeed, it can, and there are many designers pursuing low-tech directions. But why take the time when we can accomplish a similar outcome much faster using digital technology? The answer lies both in the outcome and the process for the designer. Sarah Illenberger observes

“There is, then, a sense of honesty in the handmade process that can be absent in design created mechanically. Handmade elements set up a relationship with the viewer based on trust and shared experiences. Imperfections are natural, human, and signifiers of a narrative that discloses how an object has been made. “I think that working by hand contributes to the proximity between the work and its audience.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis, Angharad

Debbie Millman, president of the design division at Sterling Brands, New York, describes handmade design in the introduction to *Fingerprint No. 2*, as containing “the rigor of sincerity” and “a deeply felt, profound awareness — a consciousness of sorts — that captured what it meant to be alive.”<sup>7</sup>

In the concept stages of *Lost & Found*, I explored a variety of low-tech directions. I wanted to develop a method for creating stand-alone pieces that could function as art or illustration. I became entangled in the definitions of art and design, examining my motivation and the function of the end product. When beginning a project for a client, all of the facts and materials are collected, the solution proposed and agreed upon before production. This project was clearly breaking out of that model. My idea, however, was reinforced by *Merge*, a book featuring work that combines art, craft and design — designers engaged in object-making, illustrators using physical elements such as wire, paper and string, and paper sculptors creating tiny explosions of letters and cut-out forms.<sup>8</sup>

I looked to current and past artists and designers who crossed the lines — Barbara Kruger, Kurt Schwitters and Joseph Cornell. But, ultimately, it was designer Martin Venezky and Berlin-based contemporary artist, Henrik Olesen whose work contributed most to the visual execution of this thesis. I looked to Venezky’s use of collage and his commitment to the imperfect and unexpected results of physical making as part of the design process.

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<sup>7</sup> Chen, Joshua C., Millman, Debbie, *Fingerprint No. 2: The Evolution of Handmade Elements in Graphic Design*. Cincinnati, OH: HOW, 2011. Print. 4

<sup>8</sup> Nasser, Abdul. *Merge: Art, Craft, Design*. Berkeley: Ginko Press, 2012. Print.

“As an antidote to the computer’s celebration of speed and efficiency (as if those qualities were necessary for good design), I’m fond of teaching what I call “Design Made Difficult.” It is a search for painstaking methodologies whose mere execution is an accomplishment and whose results can surpass those of the machine. DMD doesn’t preclude the digital, but in refusing to adopt a predetermined digitized aesthetic, it seeks out new definitions of craft and skill within the domain.”

“For this study I challenged myself to cut out one letter at a time and tape it to the board. Each tiny piece required a separate decision. It was a slow process, but the gradual accumulation allows the typography to develop organically. Inherent in the result is an exquisite rhythm and a tension between repetition and singularity.”<sup>9</sup>

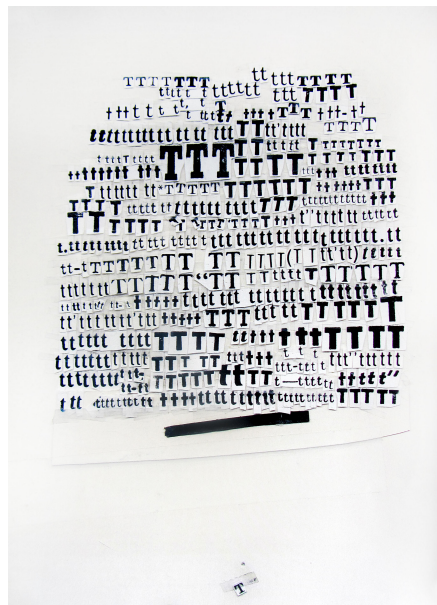


Figure 2 “T” Collage, Martin Venezky, 2000, *It is Beautiful – Then Gone*

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<sup>9</sup> Venezky, M. J. *It Is Beautiful-- Then Gone*. New York: Princeton Architectural, 2005.  
Print. 31

Henrik Olesen's work, *The Body is a Machine*, is based on the life of Alan Turing, father of modern computer science and WWII code-breaker. Seeing the work in person gave me insight into ways to use collage in series to create a larger statement. By layering and repeating imagery in varying combinations, a beautiful and subtle narrative emerged, revealing glimpses into Turing's tragic life.

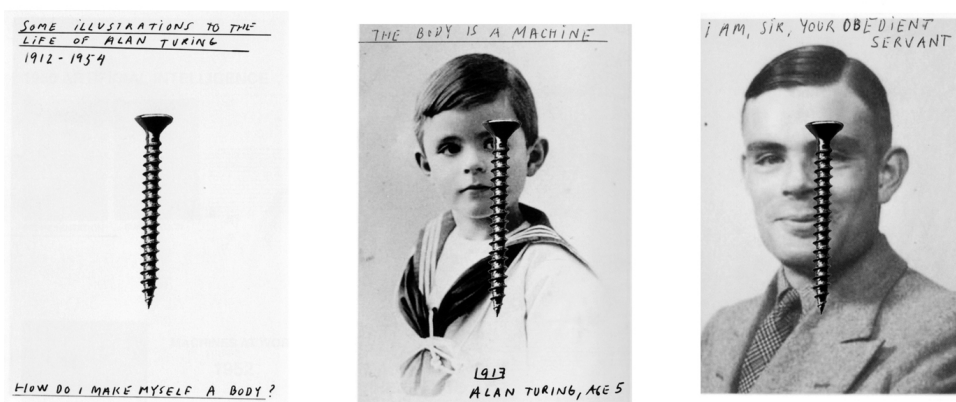


Figure 3 *The Body is a Machine*, Henrik Olesen, 2009

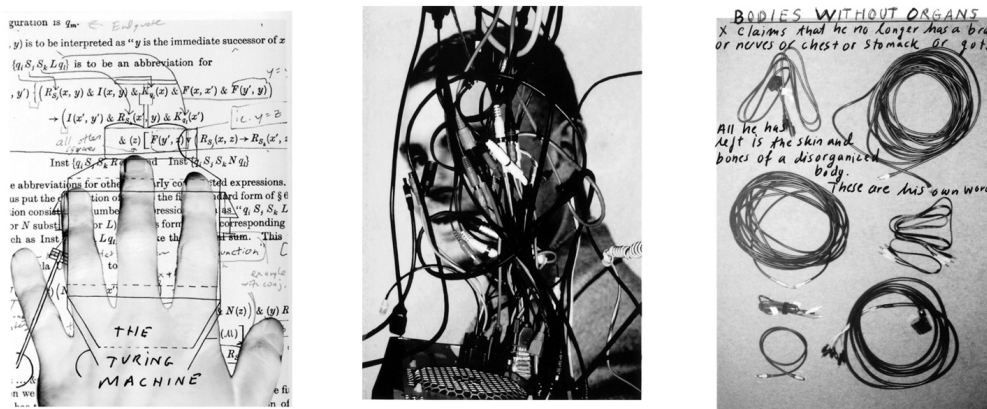


Figure 4 *The Body is a Machine*, Henrik Olesen, 2009

## DEVELOPING THE PROCESS

In the early stages, I was more interested in exploring the process than expressing information. I attempted to create a physical “layout” using paper, found materials, glue, spray paint and imagery printed from my inkjet printer. Since the content was nonspecific, using complete words seemed both limiting and contrived. Instead, I decided to crop in on a segment of a sentence, creating shapes that suggested letterforms, but were not completely identifiable. I thought it might be interesting if the letters had a drop shadow, so I raised them up on foam core. I liked the dimension that was taking place and repeated that with other shapes. I found that the quiet process of arranging the materials engaged something in me that was at once calming and consuming. This first collage felt very personal, and I realized I have grown unaccustomed to revealing myself in my work.



**Figure 5** *Lost Along the Way* (7.25" x 10.5"), 2013

I immediately did another one, and some threads began to form.



Figure 6 *The Way Back* (7.25" x 10.5"), 2013

In Debbie Millman's interview with Martin Venezky for Design Observer, Venezky states that he approaches design from art-making.<sup>10</sup> I would say, I approached art-making from design, using a framework of decisions that included:

**Color:** I intentionally limited the color palette, based on tones found in aged paper.

**Transparency:** I physically created layers of transparency by using book pages layered beneath sewing patterns and other tissue paper that I imprinted with numbers and text using an ink-jet printer. After I cut letters out of paper or ragboard, I used the negative and sometimes the positive shapes as stencils for spray painting another layer.

<sup>10</sup> Millman, Debbie. "Martin Venezky." : *Observer Media: Design Observer*. 16 Dec. 2011. Web. 06 Apr. 2014. <<http://observermedia.designobserver.com/audio/martin-venezky/30308/>>.

**Repetition:** By repeating phrases, images, and motifs such as binding images and objects in wire, a deeper message developed across the entire body of work.

**Scale:** The repetition of themes and imagery was played out in a variety of scale. The smallest pieces were 7.25" x 10" while the largest were 24" x 48" and gave the impression of being magnifications of details in the smaller work. The mid-sized pieces were matted and framed and ranged in size from 7.25 x 10 to 12" x 17".

**Typeface:** I used different weights of Futura throughout.

**Alignment:** I applied intentional alignment and juxtaposition.

By using this design-based framework, I emerged with a cohesive body of work tied together by theme, color, texture, typeface, repetition, scale and imagery.



Figure 7 *Lost & Found* 2014, back gallery wall, Welch Gallery, Georgia State University



## CONTENT

I have the habit of picking up small things that I find — much to the embarrassment of my children when they were younger. But these bits of rusted, shredded cast off debris call to me. Perhaps it is the mystery they contain. I will never know their origins nor to whom they belonged, but they were once useful and then lost or purposely discarded. By the time I find them, they have been rendered into something completely different — twisted wires frozen in place by rust, bottle caps flattened into irregular shapes and recolored by a patina that only time can create. Once I found a small American flag with all of its edges worn away, leaving only a delicate collection of threads. Transformed by the passage of time, these common mass-produced souvenirs, safety pins, wires and nails, have become singular formations.

Collecting fragments is not new for me. It is carried over from childhood. We were a transient family, moving often as the demands of my father's job changed. By the time I was twelve, we had moved cross-country four times. Packing and unpacking was a ritual, and the shoeboxes and cigar boxes containing my childhood belongings became time capsules that could conjure memories of people and experiences and create connections to the places we had left behind. Ticket stubs, girl scout patches that never met needle and thread, notes and other tiny debris were the connective tissue of our segmented life.

Now, I find that working with found materials gives me the same sense of connection, revealing to me the threads of relationships that run through our lives. These materials give me a portal into the past and ignite my imagination.



My content developed slowly as I moved further into the open-ended project. I was using found materials to which I had no personal connection, but it occurred to me that earlier in the year, a relative had sent me an old picture she came across of my mother with her parents. Her parents separated during the Depression when she was 5, and I had never seen a photo of them together. I searched her young face for some clue into the deep wound that was about to form from that separation. He went back to Texas to work on his family's ranch. And my grandmother, believing that life on a dusty ranch was a death of sorts, brought my mother back to Atlanta to be near her own family. My mother only saw her father a few times in the rest of her life.

I turned to personal materials, exploring boxes of old letters and photos that I had saved from my parents' house. Thinking I might find some revelation in the letters (especially the ones from my grandfather to my mother) I was struck by what they didn't say. It made me realize how little I knew about my own parents, and how superficial family communication can be. The letters were filled with bits of personal news, promises to write more often, weather reports, promises to visit. And I began to think of how our relationships are built on these tiny things. The large things remain unspoken.

I could not read all of the letters. Frankly, some were boring, others depressing. They brought up things I had left behind, opened questions that could never be answered. Mostly, they left me wondering what was really going on under the words. All of those silent understandings lost and scattered into fragments of family history.

As I considered how I might portray some of those fragments visually, I pulled a few sentences from the letters to begin work. The cliché phrases, "First, the good news...", "How are you?", "I am fine.", "Things are not the same..." seemed to suggest something hidden

beneath the mundane surface. Continuing my exploration with found materials, I combined some of these fragments of correspondence with the family photos, papers and objects. In the construction of each piece, through trial and error, these unrelated items eventually came together into a seemingly inevitable combination that transformed them from their original form into something greater.

This work became a way to bring the past into the present to examine, preserve and gain perspective. It expressed hidden and forgotten information and pushed a family's collective history into something both personal and universal.

### **INSIGHTS AND BREAKTHROUGHS**

Working on these collages, making connections with people from the past through their photos, letters, and physical materials, I found myself becoming more mindful of the people attached to my commercial projects — the bank teller who will hand a customer this brochure, an equipment salesman who will refer his client to this web site to solve problems he is encountering. Are the images I'm using telling a story in which these people see themselves? Will they connect and feel something?

The activity of physically engaging with and arranging these materials has given me a new dexterity in my work. It has helped me become more spontaneous and not dwell on decisions. Through my research and focus on physical object making, I feel more confident with digital design, and look forward to transferring these methods into my client work.

My biggest breakthrough occurred in attempting to work in a larger format. I am most comfortable creating on a smaller scale, using personal artifacts. I like to allow the work to develop spontaneously as I find connections between the materials. The larger pieces, however,

required planning and forced me to change my approach. I worked out a grid composition – much like one would do for an editorial or page design. Using InDesign to create the foundation for the layout gave me a “roadmap” for creating the hand-cut type and other paper elements. Once the composed materials were in place on the substrate, I could be more spontaneous with spray paint stencils, cutouts and objects. The large work provided a new dimension and visual focal point in the exhibit, giving the viewer an experience from a distance. But the details contained in the work drew the viewer in.



**Figure 8** *Lost & Found 2014*, small pieces with found objects, Welch Gallery, Georgia State University

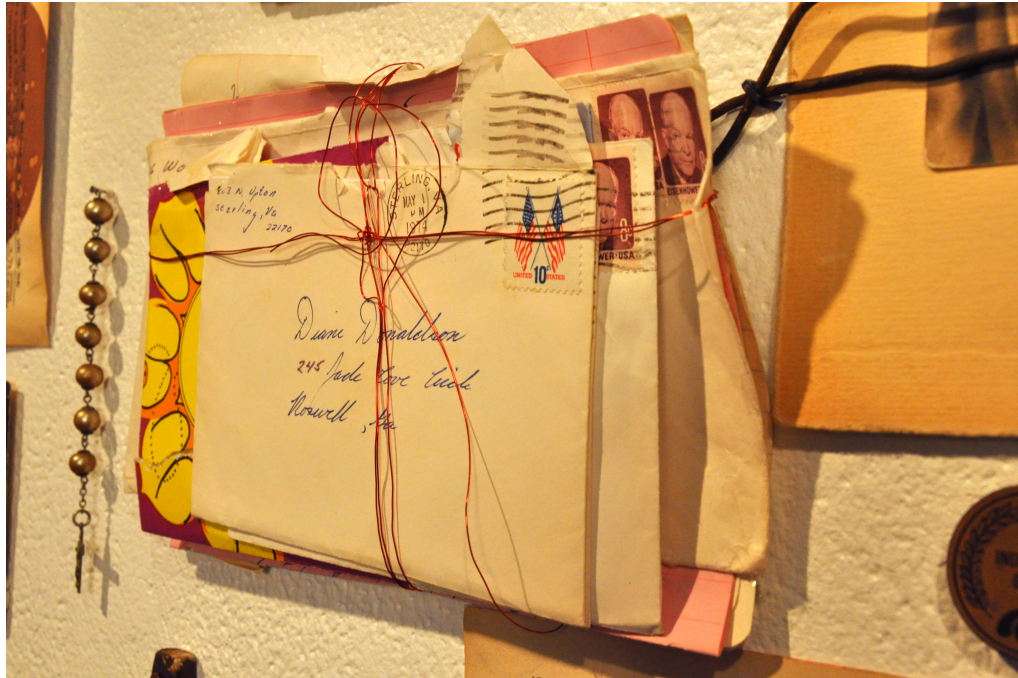


Figure 9 *Lost & Found* detail, 2014, Welch Gallery, Georgia State University



Figure 10 *Lost & Found* detail, 2014, Welch Gallery, Georgia State University



## REACTIONS TO THE SHOW

The pieces that received the strongest reactions were the large framed collages and the assemblage wall. People seemed to enjoy the photos, especially the car in the water. I received comments about the cat photos and the small crosses. My daughter seemed touched by the bundles of letters from my childhood. Many people made the connection that the assemblage wall contained the source material used in the other pieces.



Figure 11 Assemblage of source material, 2014, Welch Gallery, Georgia State University



**Figure 12 Assemblage of source material details 2014, Welch Gallery, Georgia State University**

Someone said the work suggested hidden secrets. Another viewer said the pieces seemed to contain encoded personal information. I was pleased with the overall reaction. The work prompted people to ask me about the photos and letters, and to reminisce about letter writing. My brother was pleasantly surprised to see snapshots of himself as a young boy featured in the exhibit. It prompted him to recall childhood memories. Overall, I think the combination of large-scale visual impact and small detailed content gave viewers a full experience.

## CONCLUSION

Creating the work for *Lost & Found* was a personally and professionally transformative experience. In the beginning stages of the project, my level of uncertainty was overwhelming. However, the combination of research, experimentation and unfailing encouragement from my committee enabled me to push through the difficulty to produce a body of original work. Discovering other designers using experimental and unpredictable methods gave me fresh insights, and the methods I learned not only improved my design process, but gave me a personal creative outlet as well. I will continue to develop this handmade approach to design, and plan to find ways to incorporate it into client projects whenever appropriate.

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